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# SEX WORK AND EMPOWERMENT

by

MARISA E. MACCARO

Under the Direction of Christie Hartley, PhD

## ABSTRACT

The relationship between sex and power is the focus of much feminist work. Most feminists agree that the norms of heterosexuality as defined by the dominant patriarchal ideology are central to women's continued oppression. However, feminists disagree about how women can resist these norms and whether sex work can be a site of resistance and place where women can empower themselves. While the "sex work is work" slogan of decriminalization advocacy has helped shift the label "sexual deviant" off sex workers and onto their customers, I argue that the resulting power shift is bound to power as domination. Empowerment, I argue, is experienced by sex workers through the performance of a pre-constructed sexuality that has historically been a site of powerlessness and subsequent exploration of sexual expression outside patriarchal power relations. The capacity of this creative endeavor to effect positive socio-sexual change cannot be seen through a desexualized lens.

INDEX WORDS: Sex work, Foucault, Empowerment, Power, Sexuality, Oppression

# SEX WORK AND EMPOWERMENT

by

MARISA E. MACCARO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2020

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2020

# SEX WORK AND EMPOWERMENT

by

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**DEDICATION**

To my best friend, Christina Coulter, for her unwavering support, and all the other incredible women who inspired my research.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between sex and power is the focus of much feminist work. Most feminists agree that the norms of heterosexuality as defined by the dominant patriarchal ideology are central to women's continued oppression. However, feminists disagree about how women can resist these norms. One particular point of contention is whether sex work can be a site of resistance and a place where women can empower themselves. Indeed, for every seeming case of empowering sex work, there are millions of women who enter the sex industry each year, willingly or by coercion,<sup>1</sup> and are traumatized by their experiences. Given that the majority of sex work occurs under dangerous conditions and that many women enter the industry when they are desperate for money, the emergence of a subset of sex workers who consider their work a source of power or empowerment appears incongruous. This incongruity is the starting point of my analysis.

Because many feminist philosophers understand the concept of sexuality<sup>2</sup> to be socially constructed by patriarchal norms, they tend to dismiss sex workers' reported experiences of empowerment as evidence of a lack of understanding of the social context in which sex work takes place. As a 2014 magazine article advocating decriminalization states: "Sex workers' bodies are rarely presented or understood as much more than interchangeable symbols—for urban decay, for misogyny, for exploitation—even when invoked by those who claim some sympathy, who want to question stereotypes, who want to 'help.'"<sup>3</sup> Though feminist philosophers are not known for giving sex workers the last word, I maintain that they should be

<sup>1</sup> While there is little data of the number of women *voluntarily* working in the commercial sex industry worldwide, the United States International Labor Organization estimated that nearly 3.8 million women were victims of forced sexual exploitation in 2016. See International Labour Organization 2017.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will use the term "sexuality" synonymously with sexual identity and to denote some combination of one's sexual desires and sexual expressions.

<sup>3</sup> Melissa Gira Grant, "Let's Call Sex Work What It Is: Work," *The Nation*, March 5, 2014, thenation.com.

given the first.<sup>4</sup> There are two common threads running through the first-person accounts of sex workers that I will analyze in this paper. The first is that the portrayal of sex workers as victims who lack an understanding of the social situatedness of their choices and desires is inaccurate and oppressive. The second is that the common conceptualization of power relations in sex work is constrained by a narrow understanding of the relationship between sex and power in contemporary American society. By distinguishing the concept of empowerment from that of power, I aim to illuminate the possibility of sex work that challenges reductive understandings of sexuality and its manifestations and thereby facilitates positive sociosexual change.

To better understand the discrepancies among feminist views of sex work, I will consider the disparate conceptions of power relations in a patriarchal social context that motivate arguments for sex work policy reform. What I take to be the Foucauldian desexualization strategies implicated in sex work decriminalization advocacy will be of particular interest here. Because Foucault is wary of the power that sex has come to have over our identities in Western society, Foucauldian approaches to sex crimes like rape and prostitution involve deemphasizing the sexual nature of such crimes in order to assess them outside of the influence of the power relations that shape our perceptions of them. Foucault's view of rape as an act of mere physical violence in particular has given rise to feminist criticism of Foucauldian desexualization.<sup>5</sup> This criticism informs my interpretation of the underpinnings of the debate between those who claim that sex work is best understood as both a symptom and a cause of women's oppression and those who claim that sex work is best understood as a kind of wage labor. Though

<sup>4</sup> Following Thomas McCarthy in "The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School": "While [Foucault and the Frankfurt School] refuse to take participants' views of their practices as the last word in understanding them, critical social theorists do take them as the first word and seek to engage them in the very process of trying to gain critical distance from them" (440).

<sup>5</sup> The term "desexualization" will be used in this paper to denote the deemphasis of the importance of sex to sex crimes and sex work, rather than the wholesale removal of sex from these concepts.

desexualization proves problematic insofar as it obscures the significance of sexuality as a site of women's oppression, we will see how, in the case of sex work, it can help increase the power of sex workers by reducing certain stigmas against them and encouraging policy reform that improves their working conditions.

In an effort to move away from patriarchal conceptions of power as domination, many feminist theorists have sought to reconceptualize power as the capacity to empower oneself and others to produce change and to make choices. While desexualization has helped shift the label of "deviant" away from sex workers and onto their customers, in my paper I will show that the resulting power shift is one still bound to power as domination. Empowerment, I argue, is experienced by sex workers not through the desexualization of their work, but through an openness to what sexual exchanges can be outside power relations. This openness is supported by the sex worker's performance of a pre-constructed sexuality that has historically been a site of powerlessness. Moreover, the capacity of this creative endeavor to effect positive socio-sexual change cannot be seen through a desexualized lens.

I will begin by providing a brief overview of Foucault's account of the relationship between sex and power and draw on the controversy surrounding his view of rape to delineate the advantages and disadvantages of employing desexualization strategies to promote thinking about sex work in a different way. I will then put forth an account of the distinctive approach to the harms produced by gendered differences in power that underpins advocacy of the decriminalization model of sex work regulation over the Nordic model. Next, I will show how deemphasizing the sexual nature of sex work, as "the sex work is work" slogan of decriminalization advocacy aims to do, shifts power away from customers and towards sex

workers. Finally, I will give an analysis of the distinction between power and empowerment based on the reported experiences of several sex workers and customers of sex workers.

## 2 FOUCAULT ON SEX AND POWER

Foucault promotes an understanding of the concept of “sexual identity,” or sexuality, not as the source of an essential truth about oneself, but as the product of power relations. His analysis of the relationship between sex and power begins with a challenge to what he calls “the repressive hypothesis.” This hypothesis suggests that, in the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie successfully repressed sex outside marriage and sex without procreative intent in an effort to discourage hedonistic activities that interfered with the work ethic of the proletariat. Observing the flood of sexual discourse since the Victorian era, Foucault rejects hypothesis that the bourgeoisie’s attempt to repress sex was successful. He characterizes the popular idea that it was, however, as “the fundamental link”<sup>6</sup> between power, knowledge, and sexuality. By exercising power to limit the concept of sex, the bourgeoisie not only made knowledge of sex taboo, they inadvertently imbued sex with even greater importance than it had before. Transgressing this taboo in order to access the truth of what came to be perceived as an essential aspect of one’s identity thus became a powerful act of resistance to sexual repression.

The fundamental problem with the repressive hypothesis, on Foucault’s view, is the conception of power that underlies it. According to this conception, power is something that is possessed and used to oppress the powerless. Foucault reconceptualizes power as something that is exercised, rather than possessed, and does not merely constrain behavior, but produces new behaviors. That is, power is not only repressive, it is creative. He states: “Power must be

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Random House Inc., 1978), 5.

analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.”<sup>7</sup> For Foucault, power is exercised by all individuals, not just by authority figures, via acts of compliance with and resistance to repressive power. Therefore, these power relations do not exist only between the oppressor and the oppressed; rather, they are dispersed throughout society. Power is always already everywhere because everyone and everything can be a source of power. Foucault does not deny that the bourgeoisie exercised their political power to repress sex. What his conception of power aims to illuminate, however, is the power of the responses to the bourgeoisie’s efforts. This power was exercised by ordinary individuals through everyday social interactions and brought about the opposite of the intended effect of sexual repression: a “proliferation”<sup>8</sup> of discourse on “taboo” sexual matters in the name of sexual liberation.

Two arenas of “free” sexual expression identified by Foucault are psychiatry and prostitution, the economic interests of which have “tapped into both [the] analytic multiplication of pleasure and [the] optimization of the power that controls it.”<sup>9</sup> He claims that the power of psychiatrists and sex workers to pathologize their patients and customers relies on their confessed desires and produces their identities via what he calls “perverse implantations”<sup>10</sup> that have resulted in a proliferation of “sexualities rigidified,”<sup>11</sup> or sexual identities. On Foucault’s view, though pathologization aims to repress certain desires and behaviors by organizing them into a classification system that distinguishes between what is good and normal and what is bad

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 48.

and abnormal, it also has the capacity to encourage them. The proliferation of implanted and rigidified sexual identities produces desire via mutually reinforcing “spirals of power and pleasure:”<sup>12</sup> it is pleasurable to teach someone something about themselves and it is pleasurable to learn something new about yourself because knowledge of others and self-knowledge are powerful. This pleasure, as the product of hypothesized sexual repression, has been conceptualized as sexual liberation. It is the force that can liberate the pathologized individual from the stigmatization of their pathology and encourage them to reclaim what has been pathologized by incorporating it into a positive self-understanding.

Though Foucault considers sexual liberation an illusory emancipatory project motivated by the repressive hypothesis, he recognizes that sex in Western society remains a “dense transfer point for relations of power.”<sup>13</sup> These two views are essential to understanding his controversial statements on rape given in 1977 at a roundtable discussion on the subject of sex crime legislation. In this discussion he asserts that “sexuality can in no circumstances be the object of punishment. And when one punishes rape one should be punishing physical violence and nothing but that.”<sup>14</sup> This position arises from his understanding of the significance of sex as a product of the repressive hypothesis. As discussed above, Foucault holds that one of the major ways that the bourgeoisie attempted to control the bodies of the proletariat for political purposes was by making sex taboo. This taboo, however, made sexual desire and activity seem like a source of important information about identity. Thus, resistance to the threat of sexual repression manifested as an obsession with the classification of sexual desires and activities into sexual identities, ultimately transforming sexuality into a locus of power, knowledge, and pleasure. In

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, “Confinement, Psychiatry, Prison,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 200.

order to combat the sociopolitical significance with which sexual desire and activity have become overloaded, Foucault advocates desexualization strategies that focus simply on “bodies and their pleasures”<sup>15</sup> rather than the complex, power-laden concept of “sex-desire”<sup>16</sup> currently under legislation and social scrutiny.

### 3 FEMINIST CONCERNS

Foucault separates the concept of sexual desire from that of bodily pleasure with the intention of weakening the hold that sex has on our understandings of ourselves and our experiences.

However, many feminist thinkers have denied that bodies, especially female bodies, can tell any truth divorced from the sexuality inflicted on them. Catherine MacKinnon is one of the primary critics of Foucault’s effect on the philosophical understanding of sexuality. She states:

“[P]ost-Foucault it has become customary to affirm that sexuality is socially-constructed. Seldom specified is what, socially, it is constructed of, far less who does the constructing or how, when, or where...When sexuality is a construct of discourses of power, gender is never one of them; force is central to its deployment but through repressing it, not through constituting it; speech is not concretely investigated for its participation in this construction process. Power is everywhere therefore nowhere, diffuse rather than pervasively hegemonic.”<sup>17</sup>

Sexuality, according to MacKinnon, is not socially constructed simpliciter—it is socially constructed by institutions and practices that uphold male dominance.<sup>18</sup> These inform male sexuality and define masculine sexual expression as an act of force against those with less power. Moreover, because men occupy the dominant social position, they have the power and authority

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, 157.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 131.

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the levels of social construction that impact the feminine experience of power and freedom, see Hirschmann 2003.

to construct female sexuality as “eroticized”<sup>19</sup> submission. For MacKinnon, sexual subordination is social subordination, and each is used as a justification for the other. She states:

So many distinctive features of women's status as second class—the restriction and constraint and contortion, the servility and the display, the self-mutilation and requisite presentation of self as a beautiful thing, the enforced passivity, the humiliation—are made into the content of sex for women. Being a thing for sexual use is fundamental to it.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, that the sexual objectification of women is fundamental to their social subordination is evidenced by the pervasive societal norms surrounding the appearance and comportment of women’s bodies, even outside explicitly sexual contexts.

If the contents of normal sexuality are understood as dominance and submission made sexual, then sexuality is revealed as a primary site of women’s subordination. When considering how the intimate relationship between power and sexuality should impact our understanding of rape, MacKinnon acknowledges that emphasizing the violent nature of rape highlights the distinctly masculine exercise of power as domination. However, she maintains that deemphasizing the sexual nature of rape problematically obscures the sexualized nature of dominance, which is what makes it a fundamentally gendered violation. As MacKinnon puts it, “Violence is sex when it is practiced as sex.”<sup>21</sup> Foucault emphasizes “bodies and pleasure” over expressions of sexual desire in order to mitigate the perception of sex crimes as worse than other crimes; but the implied assumption that bodily pleasure is always good and, therefore, incongruous with violence is wrong. Separating sex from rape reinforces the idea that force is not pleasurable for rapists and that sex does not involve force. Furthermore, rape is often not physically violent, as is the case with date rape or acquaintance rape. Hence, distinguishing sex from rape on the basis of force is problematic for numerous reasons.

<sup>19</sup> MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of State*, 130.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 129.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 134.



#### 4 THE DEBATE SURROUNDING SEX WORK REGULATION

In her recent work *Foucault, Feminism, and Sex Crimes: An Anti-Carceral Analysis*, Chloe Taylor expresses agreement with the feminist critique of Foucault's reduction of rape to an act of physical violence. In her analysis of sex work, however, Taylor does not deliver a similar indictment against desexualization strategies. Instead, she defends the decriminalization of sex work along the same Foucauldian lines of thought that promote the desexualization of rape. As explained in the previous section, Foucauldian desexualization strategies are concerned with combatting the sociopolitical significance that sex has accumulated as a result of the repressive hypothesis. While decriminalization is a legal measure, and therefore operates at the level of repressive power, desexualization is the intended social effect of the specific operation of that power in this case. Crucially, policy reform does not necessarily bring about social change, especially not immediately.<sup>22</sup> Rather, it is the recognition of the social meaning of sex and its entanglement with issues of women's oppression that is the driving force behind legal reform. Nevertheless, by looking at the specific ways that responses to power seek to broaden and legitimize their influence via law we can better understand the predominant attitudes surrounding issues of gender, sex, and power.

Taylor's defense is threefold. First, she argues that the prohibition of buying and selling sexual services produces desires to buy and sell them, implants these desires as perversions, and affirms them as identities. She infers from this that the decriminalization of sex work would normalize the sale and purchase of sex as a service like any other, eliminating it as a significant

<sup>22</sup> For research on the impact of legal reform on changes in social perception, specifically with regard to the implementation of the Nordic model of sex work regulation and its effects on the perception of consumers of sex work, see Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014.

source of truth about identity. Second, she argues that prohibition produces a stigma that disempowers sex workers and their customers if they accept it and empowers them if they challenge it. Decriminalization, she asserts, would challenge the idea that selling and buying sex is more disempowering or empowering than any other service job or service purchase.<sup>23</sup> Third, she argues that prohibition forces sex work underground, making the conditions in which it takes place more dangerous. Decriminalization, on the other hand, would encourage a shift away from the moral evaluation of sex work and towards an economic evaluation of its conditions. These three advantages of decriminalization operate by deemphasizing sexual desire and emphasizing the normality of exchanging money for bodily pleasure. In this way, Taylor's perspective illuminates the underlying message of the "sex work is work" slogan by claiming that sex work is *just* work. Moreover, the purchase of sexual services is just a purchase. In order for sex work to be socially and legally recognized as a legitimate service deserving of workplace regulations that ensure the health and safety of sex workers, rather than as an identity or a crime, Taylor holds that the sexual nature of it must be deemphasized.

While it is generally accepted by feminists that criminalizing sex work harms sex workers more than anyone else involved in it, the debate between proponents of decriminalization and proponents of the Nordic model is ongoing. The Nordic model decriminalizes the selling of sex but leaves the buying of it criminal. This mode of regulation is predicated on the assumptions that demand drives the commercial sex industry and that this industry is both a site and cause of gender inequality. Therefore, eliminating the demand is the best way to eliminate sex work and its harms. Proponents of the Nordic model hold that, even if

<sup>23</sup> Though I acknowledge that in a capitalist society the sale and purchase of goods is a significant source of truth about identity, I assume that identities established by capitalist consumption hold less significance than identities established outside capitalist consumption, like sexual identities.

sex work is not inherently harmful to women, it is contextually harmful. Proponents of decriminalization, on the other hand, hold that, for better or for worse, sex work exists and should be treated as work and regulated appropriately. They believe that the most effective way to neutralize the power dynamics between sex workers and their customers is through strengthening the rights of sex workers. Those in favor of the Nordic model, however, hold the converse to be true: decriminalizing sex work and treating it as a normal job help facilitate the exploitation of sex workers and contribute to the social subordination of women in general.<sup>24</sup>

The relatively new term “sex worker”<sup>25</sup> accomplishes two things: (1) It encapsulates a wide range of occupational roles, including, but not limited to, escort, prostitute, cam girl, stripper, sugar baby, and dominatrix, and (2) It emphasizes that sex work is legitimate work. Regarding the latter aim, Lori Watson responds that “calling [the exploitative, degrading, abusive, and violent aspects of prostitution] ‘work’ serves to cover up and erase the harms constitutive of the actual practices and inequalities upon which they are based.”<sup>26</sup> On Watson’s view, the “sex work is work” slogan normalizes women’s sexual service to men as a legitimate occupation and divorces it from the practical reality of sex workers. As previously discussed, the sexual objectification of women is one of the primary sites of their continued subordination to men. Given the social context in which sex work takes place, Watson calls for a closer examination of whether sex work challenges gender inequality or perpetuates it.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that many advocates of decriminalization maintain that the Nordic model of regulation makes sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation and unsafe working conditions. For more information on this, see Le Bail, Giametta, and Rassouw 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Leigh, alias “Scarlot Harlot, is credited with coining this term circa 1980 based on a personal anecdote given in her 1997 publication titled “Inventing Sex work.”

<sup>26</sup> Jessica Flanigan and Lori Watson, *Debating Sex Work* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 18.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Brison concludes her 2006 article “Contentious Freedom: Sex Work and Social Construction” with the same call, stating that “we need to consider whether one woman’s liberating (and lucrative) insurrectionary act may contribute to another’s victimization and, if so, how such conflicts ought to be addressed” (199).

Many in favor of decriminalization insist that Watson's attitude promotes the false dichotomy that sex work either empowers women or disempowers them. Instead, they hold that if there were laws in place to keep sex workers safe, then sex work could be a job with the same potential for challenging or contributing to gender inequality as any other job. People do sex work for a variety of valid reasons. Some do sex work to survive or escape poverty, while others find that sex work is the best option among a range of available options. Others still find that sex work carves out space in their lives for low-stakes sexual expression and exploration. However, the slogan "sex work is work" serves to emphasize the fact that sex work, in all of its forms, need not be reflective of the sexual identities, political goals, or moral principles of sex workers any more than waitressing need reflect a desire to serve food. Work, in all its unpleasant manifestations, is often no more than a means to pay the bills.

While desexualizing sex work has the potential to help sex workers by improving the socioeconomic conditions of their labor and reducing the force of stigmatization, we have previously seen how desexualizing rape may not help improve the situations of rape victims. Rather, conceptualizing rape as mere physical violence mischaracterizes the action and its consequences insofar as sexual objectification is a primary site of women's social subordination. Emphasizing the work side of sex work, however, brings to the forefront an aspect of sex work the neglect of which has historically been used to justify the social stigmatization of sex workers, legal disregard for their working conditions, and the exploitation that these produce. Shifting social and legal focus away from the sex side of sex work can help corrode the power dynamics entwined with all things sex related. We have seen that proponents of the Nordic model, like Watson, disagree with this line of thought, claiming that these power dynamics are an essential feature of sex work. If sex work, like rape, reflects the problematic norms of heterosexuality,

then taking the sex out of sex work in order to better view it as a normal job obscures the ways that it perpetuates power structures that systematically disadvantage women. However, many sex workers who choose to do sex work from an array of available jobs and career paths do claim to experience their work as a normal job or as a source of power or empowerment. These reports suggest that there are forces at play in sex work that stand in opposition to the power structures that have supported the use of sexuality to oppress women. Because sexuality is a primary site of women's oppression, one major way that women find themselves empowered is through expressions of sexual autonomy and creativity in safe spaces.

## **5 SELLING SEX AND PAYING FOR IT**

While the decriminalization model of sex work regulation aims to eliminate the power imbalance between sex workers and their customers, the Nordic model aims to eliminate the harms produced by this power imbalance by eliminating sex work altogether. In this section, I will use the reported experiences of sex workers and their customers as evidence of a sociocultural shift in attitudes about male and female sexuality that has redirected the current of power that flows through the sex industry away from the buyer and towards the seller.

Foucault's demystification of the repressive hypothesis illuminates the prevalence of sexual discourse following the bourgeoisie's attempt to repress sex. However, his account overlooks the repressive contents of the creative proliferation of that discourse. As previously described, female sexuality has historically been defined by the patriarchal model of dominance and submission. Expressions of female sexuality that diverge from these models have, thus, been discouraged through the stigmatization of women as "sluts" based on the quality and quantity of their sexual experiences. That is, sex was effectively repressed for women, as they were assigned

the non-sexual, or sexually pure identities of daughter, wife, and mother. The sexual desires and activities of men, on the other hand, continued to be normalized within the sexual discourse following the Victorian Era. Men seeing prostitutes, for example, was commonly understood as the fulfillment of a “natural need”<sup>28</sup> for sex with a person who can be openly treated as an object or whore. Prostitutes were, thus, construed as fallen women: either objects to be used for male sexual pleasure or whores driven by an immoderate desire for their own sexual pleasure. As Foucault discusses, the transgression of sexual taboos is commonly understood as a response to sexual repression that is both the discovery and the expression of an essential truth about one’s sexual identity. The dominant ideology that defined female sexuality, however, rendered the prostitute’s transgression shameful, rather than liberatory. Pathologized as either a sexual object or a sexual deviant, she was and is made vulnerable to exploitation and harsh criminal penalties. Consequently, many feminists have held that rejecting the Madonna/whore, prude/slut dichotomies and proliferating sex-positive discourse on female sexuality is key to the social and political, as well as sexual, liberation of women.

As attitudes about female sexuality have changed, the perception of sex work as a totalizing expression of a deviant sexual identity has changed, as well. As Taylor points out, today it is generally accepted that sex workers have sexual identities independent of their participation in the sex market, “sexualities they bracket (and possibly damage) in order to engage in their trade.”<sup>29</sup> While the sale of sexual services may not be sexual for the sex worker in the sense that it is reflective of their sexuality, the purchase of sexual services is reflective of the sexualities of the customers of sex workers and Taylor argues that this results in the perverse

<sup>28</sup> Chloe Taylor, *Foucault, Feminism, and Sex Crimes: An Anti-carceral Analysis*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 164.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *Foucault, Feminism, and Sex Crimes*, 163.

implantation of a deviant sexuality in them.<sup>30</sup> The negative psychological impact of the stigma that accompanies this pathologization on customers stands in contrast to the de-pathologization of sex workers as sex objects and sluts. This power shift towards sex workers is best illustrated by accounts of empowering sex work. The narrative surrounding empowering sex work, which often takes place indoors and online, typically involves middle-class women abandoning the 9-5 work begotten by their college degrees and becoming sexually liberated, financially independent entrepreneurs. Not only do these types of sex workers avoid the dangers of outdoor sex work, they control both their finances and their chosen allotment of sexual availability. Many of these women claim to make more as sex workers than they do with their degrees and report higher levels of self-esteem.

The men who regularly purchase the goods and services that these sex workers offer, on the other hand, often report lower levels of self-esteem. Despite their economic privilege, they lack what money cannot buy: someone who freely desires them. According to Taylor, the desire of regular customers (“regulars”) in particular for an authentic connection is exhibited by a decrease in the demand for a quick sexual release and an increase in the demand for “the girlfriend experience.”<sup>31</sup> These regulars pay for the benefits of a relationship in the hopes that purchasing a fantasy will turn it into a reality. In an analysis of the motivations and fantasies of strip club customers, Katherine Frank holds that other men who visit strip clubs are motivated by the opposite: the relief that their fantasy will never turn into a reality and some sexual lack on

<sup>30</sup> Of course, for some, the deviancy of a sexual desire intensifies the pleasure derived from satisfying it. In these cases, the stigma has been reclaimed, rather than internalized, and empowers the customer rather than disempowers him. Though sexual liberation of this sort is possible for victims of stigma generally, this liberation depends on the conception of sex as a source of truth about identity, the drive to transgress the taboo in order to discover this truth, and, most importantly, pleasure in self-knowledge. However, the power-fraught conception of sex as a source of truth about identity has the same capacity to produce repression as it does liberation.

<sup>31</sup> “The girlfriend experience” refers to a sexual service that also offers more romantic experiences characteristic of dating or having a girlfriend.

their part will never be revealed. These men, she explains, seek “both personal and sexual acceptance from women and the pleasure of a sexualized encounter without the pressures of physical performance.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, R. Danielle Egan characterizes the work of the stripper as a performance of the virgin and the whore, offering both emotional recognition and sexual stimulation while “quelling male anxiety of the unknowability of the feminine.”<sup>33</sup> Through her work as a stripper, Egan observes:

[Customers] do not want a commodified fantasy girl; they want a girlfriend who will treat them in the same manner everywhere, who will listen to their lives as emotional nurturers, and who will want to sleep with them at any time. Men come to the clubs seeking what they cannot get in other contexts—women who will occupy the site of virgin and whore unproblematically (which is another fantasy), giving them what they “need” and want. Their desire and fantasy operate recursively and intersect with commodification. As with any commodity, although satiation might happen in the moment, they are left unsatisfied after consumption—once is never enough for regulars. They must return on a regular basis. However, because their relationship with their fantasy girl is just that—a fantasy—they are ultimately left unsatisfied and must refocus their desire in another way or try to find strategies that will aid them in their possession of the object.<sup>34</sup>

According to Egan, whatever ego-boost the customer receives from fantastical interactions with women lasts only as long as he is willing to pay them, and the disillusionment that he suffers when this reality comes into focus can be harmful to his sense of self. Though these men typically occupy the most privileged social positions, they can experience severe disempowerment at the realization that the money they spent on commercial intimacy has not bought them the genuine connection they seek.

In her 1993 paper, “Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness,” Gail Pheterson refers to the social perception of men who purchase sexual services in terms of

<sup>32</sup> Katherine Frank, “Exploring the Motivations and Fantasies of Strip Club Customers in Relation to Legal Regulations,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 34, no. 5 (2005): 492.

<sup>33</sup> R. Danielle Egan, “I’ll be Your Fantasy Girl, If You’ll be My Money Man: Mapping Desire, Fantasy and Power in Two Exotic Dance Clubs,” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8, no. 1 (2003): 112.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 116.



“unworthiness,” which manifests moral disdain from both sex workers and the rest of society. However, she also claims that the criteria that make these men unworthy are the same criteria that make them manly: looking at women as sex objects; desiring women for self-satisfaction without regard for their feelings; and paying for women’s bodies as one would pay for merchandise. Elaborating on this final criterion, Pheterson states: “Socially, men are assumed to be tricks and may even be embarrassed to admit if they have never been to a prostitute, as if such nonindulgence would indicate a lack of virility.”<sup>35</sup> Though the first two criteria for unworthiness that Pheterson puts forth capture certain core aspects of the dominant conception of male sexuality, the last criterion is no longer relevant within contemporary American culture. Today, men who buy sex are often viewed by themselves and others as “sick, immoral, socially dysfunctional and sexually abnormal,”<sup>36</sup> rather than especially virile. Crucially, this is not solely a feminist evaluation. Rather, it arises from what I think is a more intuitive interpretation of masculinity as defined by the dominant patriarchal ideology. That is, real men do not have to pay women to sleep with them.

Research conducted since Pheterson’s work on stigmatization has shown that stigma plays a significant role in many men’s experiences of purchasing sexual services and extends well beyond the label “unworthy,” or “not boyfriend/husband material.” This stigma seems to come from three different directions: Christian morality, awareness of gender inequality, and most strikingly, changes in judgments surrounding what constitutes normal masculine sexual behavior. In her extensive analysis of men who buy sex, Teela Sanders describes, in Foucauldian terms, how the discourses surrounding the often separated issues of morality, gender inequality, and masculinity have turned what was once a socially accepted sexual difference into a sexual

<sup>35</sup> Gail Pheterson, “The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness,” *Social Text* 37 (1993): 47.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *Foucault, Feminism, and Sex Crimes*, 166.

deviance. She writes: “Men who buy sex have, fairly recently, been singled out from an array of sexual differences and have received social intolerance through a social and political process that crosses boundaries and discourses.”<sup>37</sup> Sanders’ field research reveals a hyper-awareness of this intolerance among men who purchase sexual services. She writes:

When I asked Trey, a 24-year-old student, to define the labels that society attached to men like him, he responded: “Stereotypes such as dirty sleazy men. Desperate men. Men who don’t respect women. Men who just see women as sexual objects. Sort of men who have perverted interests in sex.” Adam, a 32-year-old media specialist who had been spending a £100 a month visiting parlours for the previous six years, relayed similar perceptions: “I think probably loners and those with weird sort of sexual habits . . . Generally not part of society...”

The labels spanned a wide spectrum of undesirable characteristics: sexual dysfunction or incompetence, social misfit, ugly, reclusive, unfashionable and incapable of attracting a woman, an inadequate sexual partner, an irresponsible father, a deceptive lover, an adulterous husband, a sexual fantasist, sadist or just insatiable and out of control. As Norman (50, married, engineering) summarizes: “People who choose prostitutes are men in dirty raincoats and they’re all fat and they’re all bald and they all smell and what have you...it’s the roots of the stereotypical image.”<sup>38</sup>

We can see how these labels, though numerous and varied, aim to capture some combination of sexual deviance and misogyny in “men like Trey.” However, Trey is not labelled a sexual deviant or a misogynist just during the hours he spends with sex workers—these labels serve to capture something essential about his sexual identity that can be abstracted from his regularly purchasing sex.

Other labels “attack the core of men’s perceptions of masculinity.”<sup>39</sup> As Arthur, age 50, states: “People tend to think you’re paying for it so you’re less of a man than I am, probably.”<sup>40</sup> Sanders analyzes this aspect of the stigma against men who purchase sex in terms of “conventional, gendered expectations about the ‘right’ type of sex,” noting that “[c]ontrary to the

<sup>37</sup> Teela Sanders, *Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex* (Willan Publishing, 2008), 114.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 115-116.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 116.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

acclaimed sexual promiscuity and virility of the alpha male, men who buy sex are often considered to be acting against their role as the sexual instigator, accomplicher and satisfier.”<sup>41</sup>

Patrick, age 39, reflects on the impact of buying sex on other men’s perception of his masculinity in conjunction with moral judgements from women:

I still think it’s taboo to sort of pay for it. The men will sort of think, well, god, why are you paying for it? You know, get a life. Most women would probably think it was morally wrong. So therefore you’ve got two sets of values coming in...which is why you might wish to keep it quiet really.<sup>42</sup>

Keeping it quiet, however, leaves many men with an “empty feeling”<sup>43</sup> that one man interviewed by Sanders calls “vulnerability.”<sup>44</sup> The role of “sexual instigator, accomplicher and satisfier” is powerful because it involves taking control of the satisfaction of desire. When women take on this role as a job, they can experience power by taking control of someone else’s desires without exposing their own. “Sex-desire,” as Foucault calls it, is a source of extreme vulnerability, insofar as it is taken to be an expression of lack in an area that is taken to be important to one’s identity. Being sexually desirable, however, is a source of power that sex workers possess and use to make money.

Victoria Love, a paradigmatic example of the middle class, degree-holding sex worker, describes the emotional labor involved in managing the mounting expectations of intimacy from delusional clients trying to escape guilt and shame by turning the fantasy they paid for into reality as the most difficult part of being an escort. Nevertheless, she describes her work as a source of empowerment for both her and her clients. From a young age, Love understood sex

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 121.

work as a performative art and found herself attracted to the beauty and “cultural mystique”<sup>45</sup> of the call girl. Leaving a home run by a father who was not held accountable for his actions and becoming financially independent using her sex appeal gave Love a sense of power she maintains she could never have accessed had she done otherwise. Through the cultivation of the upscale escort persona that she sells to clients, Love came to identify with this persona; that is, selling this persona provided her with the means to become this persona. She further explains how, in turn, she uses her sex appeal to craft a reality in which her clients can too experience themselves as “bourgeois subjects.”<sup>46</sup>

Love concludes her essay on the following note:

Reflecting on my thoughts and experiences over the fifteen years since I started to work in the sex industry, I have come to understand that feminism has conceptualized sex work in far too limiting a manner. Sex work is about emotionally complex relationships that involve genuine feelings of intimacy; it’s about relationships of power; it’s about the complex layers of meaning we attach to our lives and activities; and it’s about having a job and making a living.<sup>47</sup>

Denying that sex work can be reduced to a site of women’s oppression, Love emphasizes the intimate connections that she has made with her clients, the changes in their lives that she has produced, and the power that she has garnered and exerted in doing so. Though it is clear from her account that Love’s own sexual desires are detached from her work, her focus on the desires of her clients has helped shape her experience of herself as someone with the power to shape how others experience themselves, however temporarily.

For stripper and member of the Sex Worker Outreach Project, Riley Renegade, it is not the emotional vulnerability of her customers that dominates her experience of sex work, but the

<sup>45</sup> Victoria Love, “Champagne, Strawberries, and Truck-Stop Motels: On Subjectivity and Sex Work,” in *Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada*, ed. Emily Van der Meulen et al. (UBC Press, 2013): 58.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>47</sup> Love, “Champagne, Strawberries, and Truck-Stop Motels: On Subjectivity and Sex Work,” 64.

oppressiveness of the male gaze and social stigma. Reflecting on her experiences of empowerment and disempowerment, she writes:

One of the most important conversations I had early on was acknowledging, yes, sex workers do have a lot of trauma. We also have incredible resilience and power. You see that duality with a lot of women. It is empowering to be benefiting from men while they are desiring you, sexualizing or objectifying you, and paying your rent with it. It is also disempowering because many men see sex workers in a reductive way...I think commodification creates a particular dynamic in sex work, but I don't believe sex work is predicated on objectification or oppression—it is more so the allure of the power of sexuality and connection...What I want people to understand about sex work is this duality. It is powerful and healing, as well as being scary and destructive. I think there is a disproportionate onus on sex work to prove itself as empowering, because it has so much stigma. I feel that within myself. It's very difficult to talk about my disempowering experiences at work because I don't want people to apply that to the whole industry, and the type of people that sex workers are. It is like any job: there are times where it's empowering, and times where I wish I could leave immediately.<sup>48</sup>

According to Renegade, she derives empowerment from the exploitation of men's desires but simultaneously experiences their gaze as objectifying and, therefore, disempowering. She maintains, however, that this objectification is not a definitive expression of women's oppression, but one of many forces at play in a power game, and considers her benefit a counterforce to the benefit of her customers. Similarly, stigma against sex workers as sex objects or sluts is counterbalanced by stigma against men who purchase sexual services.

Though stigma against sex workers persists, the cracks in its foundation are deepening. Three sources of whore stigma that Pheterson identifies have to do with moral condemnation of sexual activity with strangers, sexual activity with multiple partners, and sexual activity in which a woman takes sexual initiative, is in control, or demonstrates sexual expertise. However, despite the ubiquity of Christian morality in the United States today, these “whorish” behaviors, demonstrated by men or women, are deeply embedded in mainstream culture and are portrayed

<sup>48</sup> Riley Renegade and Kressent Pottenger, “Sex Work is Work,” *New Labor Forum* 28, no. 1 (January 2019): 100.

as fun and powerful in pop music, movies, and tv series. Notably, women who use their sexual prowess and desirability, not to satisfy their own sexual desires, but for the purpose of exploiting the sexual desires of men are frequently portrayed as even more powerful. The 2019 movie *Hustlers*, featuring pop icon and former stripper Cardi B, for example, is a comedy about a gaggle of strippers who rob powerful men working on Wall Street. Claimed to have “weaponized the female gaze”<sup>49</sup> by Harper’s Bazaar, *Hustlers* portrays the protagonists as smart, sexy, and ambitious, while their customers are portrayed as lecherous, pathetic, and easily manipulated.<sup>50</sup> As Renegade suggests, performing sexual behaviors without identifying with them endows them with the especially powerful identity of someone who is desirable but not desiring.

Love and Renegade’s accounts aim to convey the complexity of the power dynamics at play in their relationships with their customers. Recognizing this complexity is important for dismantling the victim/agent dichotomy that sex workers are so often asked to answer to. However, there are still more obvious and uncontroversial examples of empowering sex work. The fascinating and varied work of dominatrixes provides exemplary material for analysis on this front. Some dominatrixes simply sexually dominate men in exchange for money. Others, such as Mistress Velvet, who has her clients read the black feminist philosophy of Audre Lorde and Patricia Hill Collins, and Madame Hillary, who “educates” Trump supporters, dominate men by shaming them for their privilege-biased worldviews. In stressing the dangers of the narrative of women’s powerlessness, bell hooks states that “[feminist ideology] should clarify for women

<sup>49</sup> Candice Frederick, “*Hustlers* Weaponizes the Female Gaze,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, September 16, 2019.

<sup>50</sup>The immensely popular HBO series *Euphoria* also aired in 2019 and contained themes similar to those in *Hustlers*. It presented, not only all three of the above sources of whore stigma as normal, albeit emotionally complex, aspects of teenagers’ lives, but also contained the controversial storyline of a teenage girl who discovers the power of her sexual desirability through webcam dominatrixing in response to the ridicule of her body and sexuality by her peers. Though the social context that leads her to cam and makes it possible for her body and sexuality to be affirmed in this way is not unproblematic, the power she experiences through the exploitation of men is transformative and that power is made to look attractive to the audience who sees a young woman disempowered by her sexual experiences with men become empowered by using sex to disempower other men for enormous financial gain.

the powers they exercise daily and show them ways these powers can be used to resist sexist domination and exploitation.” Dominatrix Kasia Urbankik, who teaches classes in New York City on how to translate the skills of a dominatrix into everyday encounters with sexism from men, does exactly this. The work of these dominatrixes and others like them is compelling, not because it fulfills men’s submission fantasies, but because it promotes change in the way that men view women and women view themselves. Though this change is brought about through the fetishization of women taking on a dominant role, that positive social change can be effected this way is a product of the power of sex in our society. As burlesque performer The Incredible, Edible Akynos suggests, in our misogynist culture, “Selling sex can be the way that men learn how to treat women.”<sup>51</sup>

While dominatrixes, escorts, and strippers can create change on a client-by-client basis, feminist pornographers and female pornographers can create change by reaching a wider audience. Porn star and producer Angela White, for example, eagerly entered the porn industry as soon as she was of age because it was the first place that she saw sexual fluidity being celebrated and later created her own company in order to explore her sexuality more deeply and bring her own fantasies to life. Concerned with myths surrounding power dynamics in the porn industry, White focused her master’s thesis in Gender Studies on the representation of the reported experiences of women in pornography. What she found was that these porn actresses, like Riley Renegade, felt oppressed by the constant demand that they respond to judgments of them as victims and assert their capacity to make their own choices. In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, White describes how this discovery shaped her approach to her research, saying “I don’t look at whether women are abused or empowered. I look at how the performers in porn

<sup>51</sup> Akynos, “To Become a Woman is to Become a Whore,” *Ravishly*, September 9, 2014.

experience their sexuality—how performing in porn has changed their sexuality—and I think more research on the topic needs to be done.”<sup>52</sup> According to White, “the false dichotomy of victim or agent” that shapes sex workers’ understandings of themselves is harmful because it is reductive. She maintains that sex work can be “positive and transforming for both performers and consumers”<sup>53</sup> insofar as it promotes the validity of female sexuality and the fluidity of sexuality in general.

By analyzing the above narratives of sex workers, we can track how the terms “power” and “empowerment” are ordinarily used. Love uses these terms interchangeably while describing her experience of cultivating a persona that helped construct her identity which subsequently contributed to the construction of the identities of her clients. Many dominatrixes, whose job is to exert power over their clients, find the changes that their work produces in their understandings of themselves and their clients’ understandings of women empowering, while others simply find being in a dominant but sexually desire-less role empowering. White’s research avoids talking about power relationships in pornography or experiences of empowerment and disempowerment among porn actresses in order to better focus on the transformative power of sexual exploration that pornography can facilitate. Like White, Renegade too claims that sex work is not empowering or degrading simpliciter. However, she also maintains that when it is empowering, that power is derived from using her sex appeal to seduce men into paying twenty dollars for a three-minute lap dance. Unlike White, power for Renegade has less to do with expressing her sexuality and more to do with using her sex appeal to her financial benefit.

<sup>52</sup> Aurora Snow, “Meet the Porn Star Turned Academic Who’s Revolutionizing the Adult Industry,” *The Daily Beast*, December 29, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



If sex work is just work, if it is “like any job,” as Renegade claims, then it is no more empowering than any other job we might characterize as “just work.” It is my view that in order for a job to be empowering it must demonstrate an attempt to effect change that is related to the nature of the job. In the next section I will articulate a definition of “empowerment” and offer an account of how it differs from power based on the perspectives of sex workers on the power relations involved in their work.

## 6 EMPOWERMENT

Previously I talked about the power of responses to repressive power. I will now talk about how these responses can be empowering. Some feminist philosophers hold that the word “power” has the implicitly patriarchal connotation of “power over” or “power as domination” and have thus sought to reconceptualize power as empowerment: the “power or capacity to” transform oneself and others. In light of my analysis of the prominent positions in the sex work regulation debate in conjunction with the reported experiences of several sex workers and customers of sex workers, I will now argue that empowerment does not manifest as straightforward resistance to exercises of repressive power. In her philosophical work on social construction and gendered oppression, Nancy Hirschmann expresses the Foucauldian sentiment that “we are all players in the field of power, and we are all played upon as well.”<sup>54</sup> It is my view that empowering acts resist not just the contents of repressive power, but the “player/played” form power must take in order for us to recognize it as such. That is, they are empowering because make an attempt to redefine the game.

<sup>54</sup> Nancy Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Towards a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 83.

Let's take stock of the argument so far. Power is not just about constraint but creativity. In order to strip the concept of rape of the power it has accumulated as a result of the repressive hypothesis, Foucault claimed that it should be viewed as a physical violation but not a sexual crime. Though viewing rape as a violent crime rather than a sexual one obscures the sexualization of dominance and submission, desexualizing sex work in order to better view it as a job rather than a crime does not necessarily contribute to the normalization of women's sexual objectification, as some feminist thinkers have claimed. Rather, viewing sex work through a desexualized lens highlights the sex worker's use of her own sexual objectification as a means of exploiting the sexual desires of her predominantly male customers, who are often regarded by her as nothing more than wallets.<sup>55</sup> Given the role that male sexual desire plays in women's social subordination, it is unsurprising that many women find making money in this way a source of power.

We have seen how a desexualized understanding of the relationship between sex workers' sexual identities and their work has contributed to the reconceptualization of sex work as legitimate work. Women who do sex work are increasingly viewed less as "whores" and more as independent entrepreneurs, or "hustlers." Though part of what it means to be a hustler in this context is to make money off one's sexual objectification, objectification is an aspect of many jobs, from fast food chain employee to social media influencer. Crucially, this sexual objectification is not pathologized, as it is understood as a role or performance contingent on the pay of the subject enacting it. Men who pay for sexual services, on the other hand, do so out of an expression of a desire for something more significant than money to human identity, that for whatever reason they cannot or do not want to get for free, and are thus pathologized as sexually

<sup>55</sup> "Wallets" is a derogatory slang term for "men," used by sex workers to affirm the objectification of their customers on the basis of their money.

deviant. Because desire for money has a weaker hold on identity than desire for sex, the vulnerability of the sex worker pales in comparison to that of the customer in this regard. Despite the increased power that many sex workers enjoy as a result of the desexualization of their craft, I hold that the sexual nature of sex work is essential to its potential as a source of empowerment. It is precisely because the sexual objectification of women is a primary site of their oppression that the sex part of sex work is where sex workers can challenge the norms of the dominant patriarchal ideology.

Unlike the victim of rape, the sex worker freely submits herself to the male fantasy that objectifies her, and this puts her in a good position to play with the boundaries of this role. As Luce Irigaray writes,

[o]ne must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation and thus to begin to thwart it. [...] To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself...to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic...<sup>56</sup>

The deliberate performance of femininity can serve as a means of recovering the objectification and exploitation that is inevitably experienced outside work. While on the job, the male gaze is appropriate, touch is a matter of permission, and both cost money. According to Egan, sex workers do not merely occupy “the place of exploitation” as passive objects but use this position to problematize and subvert oppressive structures. They affirm the male fantasy but only as a job that is a performance. Egan, therefore, locates resistance in the exchange of money that shatters the customer’s fantasy. However, the power of taking his money, shattering his fantasy, and pathologizing him is power conceptualized via the “masculine logic” of domination that the concept of empowerment seeks to circumvent.

<sup>56</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.

Moving towards the redefinition of power as empowerment, Jean Baker Miller describes power as “the capacity to produce a change—that is to move anything from point A or state A to point B or state B.”<sup>57</sup> She states that this includes “moving one’s thoughts or emotions, sometimes a very powerful act,” and “acting to create movement in an interpersonal field as well as acting in larger realms, such as economic, social, or political arenas.”<sup>58</sup> However, not all “movements” are positive, as a crucial aspect of women’s continued subjugation is the adaptation of thoughts in order to salvage pleasure and fulfillment from their subjugated position. In writing about the empowerment of black American women, Patricia Hill Collins takes Baker’s definition a step further by framing empowerment as a change in consciousness that results from an interaction between internal transformation and the transformation of the wider community. She emphasizes that, even when their choices are limited by patriarchal forces, women can become empowered through self-knowledge. The combination of these two conceptions of power as capacity yields a definition of empowerment that encapsulates a chain reaction that starts with an understanding of why one makes the choices one makes and ends with broader social changes that in turn influence others to reflect on their choices.

The concept of empowerment has also been embraced by “power-feminists” wary of feminism’s excessive focus on women’s victimization, particularly in academia. Power-feminists instead focus on supporting the choices that women make regardless of the social contexts in which the choices are made. However, it has been argued that this focus on hyper-individualistic and assertive choice-making is more aligned with the masculine “power as domination.” The longstanding fear of the “unthinking ‘feminist’”<sup>59</sup> that imitates men in order to gain power is met

<sup>57</sup> Jean Baker Miller, “Women and Power,” in *Rethinking Power*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 241.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Caputi, *Feminism and Power: The Need for Critical Theory* (Lexington Books, 2013), 17.

with a call for consciousness-raising. Again, self-knowledge, gained through the process of analyzing the social structures in place that influence one's attitudes and choices, empowers and can be an impetus for change. By occupying the masculine roles of instigator and expert in the traditional model of heterosexuality, sex workers may challenge this model of sexuality but not the power structures that uphold it. Similarly, the power of "the hustle," depicted in popular culture and present in the reported experiences of sex workers like Riley Renegade and Cardi B, relies on the perception of men who purchase sexual services as comparatively lacking in power and is therefore bound to "power as domination." The concept of empowerment in part serves to highlight that power shifts like these will not bring about meaningful change between men and women.

The empowerment that many sex workers claim to derive from experiencing themselves as desirable, while simultaneously lacking the desires that they exploit in their customers, is an illusion insofar as it relies on the exploitation of sexual desire. As previously stated, empowerment is an understanding of one's choices that enhances one's capacity to bring about positive social change. Consider how desexualizing sex work places it on par with other service jobs that are not classified as empowering. When a person distances their understanding of themselves from the work they do, they protect their identity by treating their job as an end-oriented performance. For example, a misanthropic waitress puts on a performance of affability when working in order to make better tips. In doing so, she distances her "true" self from her job. Moreover, she and her customers likely do not understand what she does as a waitress as a meaningful aspect of her identity. Service workers exercise power over their customers and vice versa, but neither party would be called "empowered." The distance between the sex worker's sexual identity and their work allows them to treat sex work like any other job, but it also gives

them the power to pathologize their customers on the basis of their sexual desires. The affirmation derived from the inversion of heterosexual norms that is inherent to this exploitation is the product of an exercise of power that dominates but not power that challenges the structure of dominance and submission in place. Moreover, sex work conceptualized and experienced as powerful in the former way affirms the use of sex-desire as a tool of oppression.

Though the decriminalization of sex work has improved the working conditions of sex workers in many of the countries that have implemented it, the desexualizing force of the “sex work is work” position runs counter to the possibility of empowerment through sex work. Crucially, I am not claiming that sex work needs to be empowering in order to be deserving of improved labor conditions. Moreover, that many sex workers experience their work as a normal job with the same power relations as other jobs is valid. These power relations, however, take the form of repression, or dominance, and responses to repression via either submission or resistance. As we have seen, one form of resistance to sexuality as a site of women’s oppression is the objectification of men and the exploitation of their sexual desires. Because of the power that sex has over identity, when sex work effects positive change, whether at the individual level or more broadly, it does so in the arena of sexuality and its expressions. This type of change cannot be produced from sex work that is desexualized, whether for purposes of normalizing the sale and purchase of sexual services or increasing the power of sex workers.

Audre Lorde analogizes the distinction between power and empowerment to that between the pornographic and the erotic. She considers understanding the self, and how that self has been forged by experiences of oppression, a source of erotic power, defining the erotic as “an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work,

our lives.”<sup>60</sup> Conversely, the “superficially erotic,”<sup>61</sup> or pornographic, “emphasizes sensation without feeling” and has been used against women to maintain their inferior social status. This distinction illuminates the power of reflection on one’s feelings in conjunction with the refusal to be externally defined. The erotic aspects of sexual expression are often overlooked because they do not exhibit the power dynamics of the pornographic. Instead, they rely on what Monique Deveaux calls “the *inner* processes that condition women’s sense of freedom or choice.”<sup>62</sup> This “power-from-within”<sup>63</sup> does not deny the social forces that act upon us, nor does not seek to invert, dominate, or control these forces. Failure to attempt to dominate these forces and the meanings they produce, however, is not submission to them nor is it an active resistance to them. Rather, it allows one to observe them from the outside of power relations, where exploration, play, and performance are possible.

While the sex industry is infamous for its superficiality, sanitized eroticism and the sexual objectification of the worker or the customer are not necessary features of sex work. The narratives of sex workers like Victoria Love, Angela White, and Riley Renegade, who emphasize the power of sexual intimacy, the joy of sexual exploration, and the complexity of sexuality, suggest the presence of redefinition and reclamation rather than domination in the inner processes that shape their respective lines of work. In White’s academic work and her work as a pornographer, she refrains from asking sex workers about “empowerment” because this word often evokes the question of who has power and who lacks it, who exercises it over whom and who relinquishes it to whom. Instead, she asks how sex work has expanded their understanding

<sup>60</sup> Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984) iBook edition.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Monique Deveaux, “Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault,” *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 234.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward a New Value* (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), 118.

of what sexuality is and what it can be. Sex workers are not pure victims or agents—like all players in the field of power, they create their work as their work creates them. However, it is through awareness of this power laden context that they can create sex work that cannot be reduced to a product of the oppressive power structures that dictate what women are and what sex is, empowering themselves and others in the process. Sex work can be a purposive performance that opens up a space for play with the possibilities of what sexual expression can be and stands in opposition to what is socially and culturally recognizable as normal sexuality.

## 7 CONCLUSION: TOWARDS LIBERATION

Liberation from the entanglement of sexual desire with identity is understood by Foucault, not as a sexual liberation, but as a liberation from the encroachment of power on the pleasures of the body. On his view, the classification of normal and abnormal sexual desires is repressive in that it aims to limit and control behavior, but it is not *sexually* repressive because it is representative of an overabundance of sexual discourse. Though individuals can exercise power in response to pathologization at the hands of this classification system by reframing their deviant sexual desires and activities as a source of self-knowledge, Foucault instead advocates deemphasizing the sexual nature of activities that signify sexual deviance so that we can better appreciate the pleasures of the body outside of the power relations that shape our understandings of ourselves. However, this perspective does not fully appreciate that the modes of female sexuality proliferated in the wake of the Victorian Era were non-sexual or sexually pure identities onto which male sexual desires could be projected; and, consequently, how the capacity of women to respond to this repression has since been limited by such patriarchal forces. Placing the harshness of past attitudes towards sex workers in contrast with the charity with which their



customers have often been assessed illuminates the extent to which female sexuality has been repressed.

The Nordic model and the decriminalization model of sex work regulation are interesting, not just in virtue of the major policy reforms that they propose, but because of the differing conceptions of power relations in a patriarchal social context that underlie them. The idea behind decriminalization, that sex work can become a just enterprise by discounting the significance of its sexual nature, gestures towards a new social context in which sex is reduced from a locus of power to a bodily pleasure that can be commodified just like any other bodily pleasure. However, as proponents of the Nordic model suggest, attempting to treat sex work just like any other kind of work runs the risk of obscuring and compounding the reality of the present social context in which sexual objectification *is* a tool of women's oppression. On this view, sex work can never be just and therefore ought to be eradicated. Neither of these responses to the power that sex has, however, leaves room for change within the concept of sex as irrevocably power laden in the patriarchal sense. The theoretical exploration of sex work in this paper is intended to open up the possibility of its promoting an understanding of sexuality as fluid, rather than a rigid determinant of identity, and its expression as an exploration of bodies and their pleasures that is its own end.

The Foucauldian approach to liberation from the harms that the power of sex has produced is illustrated by the desexualization strategy that underlies the decriminalization model of sex work regulation. However, as examined in this paper, the conceptual desexualization of sex work can be taken up by the sex worker through reclamation of the sexually desire-less sexual identity and used to objectify their customers on the basis of their money and stigmatize them on the basis of the sexual desires they themselves might lack. It is this distance between the

sex worker's sexual identity and her work that gives her the power to pathologize. Contra Foucault, I have argued that liberation from the harms that the power of sex has produced can be a sexual liberation, rather than a desexualized one. Liberation of this kind demands that the social meaning of the desires implicated in certain bodily pleasures be taken into account so that it can be divested of the power to distinguish normal, socially acceptable pleasures from perverse ones. According to my account, sexual pleasure can be significant without being repressive.

The commercial sex industry is an area where gendered differences in power are highly visible and hotly contested as a result. For this reason, examining what it means for a sex worker to be empowered can be informative for establishing what it means to be empowered in other areas where, to many, empowerment seems unlikely given the social realities of oppression. As some of the primary contributors to the proliferation of sexual discourse, those who work in this industry are in a good position to challenge norms according to which sex operates as an instrument of power and power as an instrument of sex. Desexualizing the occupational identity of sex workers in order to strip it of its significance, however, precludes a crucial response to oppression that is rendered invisible within the power structures created by an oppressive sexual discourse. As sex work evolves alongside technology, attitudes about sex, and in some countries, policy, it is increasingly possible for sex workers to demonstrate resistance that does not seek to use the power of sex for personal gain but attempts to thwart that use instead for the purpose of creating a larger social impact. These attempts can be empowering for sex workers but can also empower others who are harmed by the norms produced by the power relations inherent to sexuality as defined by the dominant patriarchal ideology, including the consumers of sex work, to challenge these norms. There is power in understanding ourselves as shaped by the power relations in the crossfire of which we find ourselves and power in using that understanding to

clarify the changes necessary for moving away from these. But powers of this kind cannot be seen using a conceptual framework that privileges resistances to power that take on the form of that power.

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